

# RENE DESCARTES

1596-1650

Descartes has long been celebrated as "the founder of modern philosophy," but never of modern political philosophy. His epochal beginning appears to stand in splendid isolation from the older modern political tradition founded by Machiavelli: he never even composed a thematic discussion of political things. This suggests that modern philosophy and modern political philosophy are separate in origin and perhaps divergent in intention. A link between Descartes and the modern political tradition is visible, however, in his relation to Francis Bacon, the first great and avowed advocate of Machiavellian politics directed to the mastery of fortune or nature in human affairs. Copying even the language of Bacon, Descartes asserted that philosophy founded in a new method and directed to "the mastery and possession of nature" would attain the greatest glory for philosophy and the greatest benefit to society. His political teaching, therefore, is mainly concerned with the paramount political necessity, the establishment of harmonious relations between philosophy or science and society, or with the "Enlightenment" version of that relationship, the ruling relationship of modern times. Accordingly, d'Alembert, a prime mover of the French Enlightenment, could declare in the *Encyclopédie* (1751) that Descartes "laid the foundations of a government more just and more happy than has ever been seen established."<sup>1</sup>

Descartes' political teaching is partially obscured because of the notorious caution of his manner of writing: "I have composed my philosophy in such a way as not to shock anyone, and so that it can be received everywhere, even among the Turks."<sup>2</sup> His caution is evident in the fact that he never published praise or blame of any political philoso-

phy in his own name, but only an anonymous praise of Bacon's *Great Instauration* and *New Atlantis*; whereas in private letters he accepted "the principal precept" of Machiavelli, "noticed nothing bad" in his *Discourses on Livy*, and thought Hobbes's politics in his *On the Citizen* superior to his metaphysics.<sup>3</sup>

Descartes' political teaching is part of "the highest and most perfect moral science" which is the end of philosophy altogether. "The whole of philosophy is like a tree, the roots of which are metaphysics," namely, knowledge of God and the human soul; "the trunk is physics, and the branches which come from the trunk are all the other sciences," but principally medicine, mechanics, and morality. "Just as it is not from the roots nor from the trunk of trees that one gathers the fruits, but only from the extremities of their branches, so the principal utility of philosophy depends on those of its parts that one can only learn last."<sup>4</sup> The ultimate branch is "the perfect moral science . . . which, presupposing an entire knowledge of the other sciences, is the last degree of wisdom." Yet it is almost universally held that nowhere in his published or unpublished writings can one find Descartes' "perfect moral science." This difficulty is inseparable from another that arises from inspection of the tree of knowledge. Man is treated twice, once as the second metaphysical root and once as the highest branch. But in each of the published versions of his metaphysics Descartes treats first the human soul and then God. Moreover, the simile omits any reference in the "roots" to the metaphysical principle coeval with the soul, namely, corporeal substance, from which the "trunk" presumably must grow. Hence, the poetic simile of the tree of knowledge is deceptive as regards its least visible part.

We are forced then to seek for a nonpoetic argument according to which man is the beginning and end of the tree of knowledge and "the perfect moral science" its "principal utility." Only in the *Discourse on Method* (1637) does Descartes offer an account of the beginning and end of his philosophy, of all the parts and their true order. Nevertheless, this writing is customarily depreciated today because of its popular character. Yet precisely its popular rhetoric is the first sign that the *Discourse* alone treats the peculiar difficulty of Descartes' supreme goal: the "perfect moral science" will come into full existence only by an unprecedented political cooperation between philosophy and the public.

Descartes writes that he began with the opinion of his Jesuit teachers that study would yield "a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful to life." By the criterion of utility, he examined and rejected the learning of the schools and the whole of ancient philosophy. One science alone, mathematics, he excepted; what "astonished" him was that

"no loftier edifice had been built on the firm and solid foundations" of mathematics.<sup>5</sup> In place of that wonder at the fundamental perplexities that confront the mind that was the beginning of philosophy for the ancients, Descartes substitutes astonishment at a hitherto undreamed-of possibility of human "creativity" that will banish wonder: "I shall reveal to you secrets so simple that you will henceforward wonder at nothing in the works of our hands."<sup>6</sup> As contrasted with mathematics, "philosophy," which ought to supply the "foundations" of the sciences, is wholly disputable, useless, and uncertain. "Theology"—a term that Descartes uses here and everywhere to signify revealed theology exclusively—"shows the way to gain heaven," to which he "aspired as much as any other." But "revealed truths" are "above our intelligence": hence they are not clear and assured knowledge useful for life. The only moral writings he so much as mentions in his critique of the tradition are "the writings of the pagans"—they too lack foundations.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes opposes the goal of the classic tradition since he abandons the "speculations," or the quest for knowledge for its own sake, in favor of "useful knowledge." The justification of the rejection of the classic view appears from the treatment of the one discipline in the critique that treats of man's end. The "writings of the pagans" comprise the moral teachings of the Stoics especially, but also those of Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy. While the pagan writings contain many "exhortations to virtue which are most useful," the "superb and magnificent palaces" of virtue are "built on sand and mud." What the pagans "called by such a beautiful name," *i.e.*, "virtue," is "often only insensibility, or pride, or despair, or parricide."<sup>8</sup> Pagan virtue which claimed to be a mean, and the excellence of man, is therefore often an extreme, and an inhumane, presumptuous, poor-spirited, and even criminal extreme. As extremes the pagan virtues cannot be distinguished from the passions. "There is nothing in which the defective nature of the sciences that we have received from the ancients appears more clearly than in what they have written on the passions."<sup>9</sup>

Descartes replaced the distinction made by the ancients between the passions and the virtues with the distinction between good and bad passions. The basis of the ancient distinction was the view that the soul has parts, that certain parts are capable of listening to and obeying reason, and that by their means reason can establish and rule a natural hierarchy within the soul. Reason is autonomous because reason has its own proper object, or because "all men by nature desire knowledge," regardless of the utility of knowledge. Descartes rejects this view of a natural order of the soul: the ancients had not seen the acute "de-

pendence of the mind" or reason on the passions or "on the temperament and the disposition of the organs of the body."<sup>10</sup>

Descartes' twofold reflection on the power of the passions and the promise of mathematics leads directly to his argument for a new method which is at the same time his primary political reflection. Since the virtues are replaced by certain passions, the "useful for life" must be understood as that which serves the ends of the passions. Among the passions, however, distinctions must be drawn between good and bad, useful and useless, noble and ignoble passions. More precisely, what is required is a comprehensive passion, or a passion that can supply a principle of order to the other passions, hence necessarily the passion capable of mastering the other passions. This most useful passion will thus be the noblest and most perfect master passion. Descartes begins his argument for method with the principle "there is less perfection in works composed of several portions, and carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one [master] has worked."<sup>11</sup> What is made wholly by one master is wholly in the power of that master: thus he begins as the Stoics had done, with what is wholly in one's own power, without restricting this to "one's own thoughts." His principle is articulated by a series of examples of masters that culminates in reason as a form of mastery. But since it is "the will of some men using reason" that leads to perfect mastery, reason is in the service of the will, or as Descartes will later say, of the supreme passion he called "generosity."

The examples are seven: (1) the single architect of a building; (2) the single engineer of the buildings of a city; (3) the general case of the single "prudent" legislator who gives laws to a people; (4) the special case of the single divine legislator, God, who made "the ordinances" of "the state of the true religion," or of Christendom, which "must be incomparably better regulated than all the others"; (5) the special case of the single human legislator of pagan Sparta—the only human legislator ever praised by Descartes—even though many of the Spartan laws were "very strange and even contrary to good morals"; (6) the simple reasonings made naturally by a single man of "good sense"; and (7) the final, hypothetical case of a single man who had perfect use of his unaided reason from infancy, unaffected by "appetites or preceptors."<sup>12</sup>

The series of examples is an ascent: it ascends from lower practical arts concerning inanimate things to the highest (including the divine) practical art of legislation, and thence to the highest theoretical "mastery," the use of unaided human reason. Since all the masters are authors of "works," "work" must include the highest use of reason: mastery is neutral to the distinction between thinking and making, philosophy and technē. Philosophy is henceforth described, as previously by Bacon,

as "architecture": the organic simile of "the tree of knowledge" is deceptive. The first meaning of "perfection" in the series is the unity of the "work" deriving from the singleness of the master. To this he adds a second, the magnitude of the subject matter on which the master works. Therefore, Descartes' mastery will be as comprehensive as the series, or such a theoretical mastery of the whole or nature, the object of greatest magnitude, as will also comprehend the highest practical mastery, "legislation" of the greatest magnitude. Political science, the architectonic or master art according to Aristotle, is replaced by philosophy understood as theoretical mastery, or "architecture." To unity and magnitude Descartes adds, by the final example, a third ground of perfection, namely, that source within the master from which perfect mastery proceeds: the unaided use of human reason. All three grounds take their place in the definition of that master passion that Descartes calls the highest virtue, "generosity": the sensation in oneself of "a firm and constant resolution . . . never to fail of one's own will to undertake and execute all the things [one] judges to be the best . . . which is to follow perfectly after virtue."<sup>13</sup> Evidently "generosity" has not the sense of "liberality" of its English counterpart.

Yet the final example is hypothetical—the master who had perfect use of his unaided reason from infancy, unaffected by "appetites or preceptors." Of himself Descartes observes that he was sufficiently free from the passions to be able to reflect, at the outset of his chief reflections in the *Discourse* and *Meditations*, because of chance rather than virtue. As for his preceptors, he speaks of "the religion" in which he had been "instructed from his infancy." He must therefore find a procedure or a method that will purge the mind of all opinions and beliefs that depend on "appetites and preceptors." Only the construction of a method, and not the natural use of natural reason, can overcome the natural disproportion between the rate of growth of the appetites or passions and that of reason. For the prejudices received from our appetites or passions beginning in childhood govern our sense perceptions and cannot be corrected by reason which naturally serves those passions. Hence all previous philosophy that began with sense perception and lacked a method for purging the mind of prejudices necessarily went astray. Method can master the natural defects or disproportions of man's nature by taking as its model mathematics, which is certain because it owes nothing to the senses or to the body. But to be the comprehensive mastery as well as to master the body, method must become comprehensive mastery of all body, *i.e.*, mathematical physics.

That Descartes' highest example of mastery, or "generosity," necessarily includes politics or "legislation" becomes fully evident from his

immediately following reflection on "reformations."<sup>14</sup> The first rule of method demands the rejection of all opinions that are not "clear and distinct," or the "reformation" of those uncertain opinions that are the "foundations" of one's own life. As contrasted with this private "reformation," Descartes asks whether it is desirable that states and nations be reformed by a private individual, and if desirable whether it is legitimate and possible. But the opinions a private individual must necessarily doubt are also the ruling or constitutive opinions and therefore "foundations" of states.

The connection of private and public reform is peculiarly evident in that private reform of defects in "the body of the sciences" can lead, and perhaps ought to lead, to reform in "the order established in the schools" to teach the sciences, and the schools are the authoritative repository of the opinions that are the "foundations" of the "great bodies," *i.e.*, states and nations. Descartes thus agrees with the classic view that opinion is the element of society, the binding ligament that gives it unity and motion. Publication of his private reform would necessarily raise the question, therefore, of whether he intended a public reformation: again he agrees with the classics that philosophic questioning when made publicly tends to erode the element of opinion in which society lives. Moreover, the jeopardy to the foundational opinion of society is unprecedented in the case of Descartes' philosophy, because his method demands the blanket attainer of all opinion that lacks the certitude of mathematics. Yet Descartes did publish his method, even writing in a popular mode and in the vulgar tongue, and thereby indicated that he intended a public reformation.

Descartes' political intention in the *Discourse* remains obscure without at least brief clarification of the three chief features of its rhetoric. Descartes is often believed to be a political conformist because his provisional morality begins: "the first [rule] was to obey the laws and customs of my country, retaining constantly the religion in which God has given me the grace to be instructed from my infancy."<sup>15</sup> Apart from the provisionality of the rule, it is less often observed that in the center of the same paragraph he says that "in the corruption of our morals there are few people who wish to say all that they believe." He was "forced to add these rules" of provisional morality because otherwise "pedagogues and the like would say of him that he is without religion and faith and seeks to overthrow all that with his method."<sup>16</sup> This prudential character of its rhetoric blurs the meaning of the principal literary feature of the *Discourse*. Just as the argument on supreme mastery leads to "my way," the way of the individual Descartes which is unprecedented, unrepeatable, and needless of repetition, so likewise

his act of publication is entirely unique. The form of the *Discourse* is therefore that of an autobiography of the first and final founder of philosophy. Its third rhetorical feature, its popularization of philosophy, becomes intelligible when one learns in what sense the founder is in need of nonphilosophers.

Descartes' act of publication is premised, firstly, on the desirability of the reform of existing states, which is evident "from their diversity alone," but ultimately on the desirability of a permanent reform of the relations of philosophy and the public. Since "diversity alone" evidences imperfection, there will be but one good regime characterized by the perfect relation of philosophy and the public. His particular criticisms of contemporary society imply the general character of the permanent reform. The prime authority for existing "foundations" breeds civil war: "the controversies of the schools, by insensibly making those who practice themselves in them more captious and obstinate, are possibly the chief causes of the heresies and dissensions that now exercise the world."<sup>17</sup> The entire reflection on mastery, Descartes' famous day in the "stove," begins with a reference to the "wars" in Germany and ends with a reference to the war in Holland: it is framed by the post-Reformation wars between the Catholic and Protestant powers of Europe. The "state of the true religion," or Christendom, exhibits not the unity of its founder but self-diremption.

The question of the legitimacy of public reformation by private individuals is subordinate for Descartes to that of its possibility, for the reason that "fortune" is a title to legitimate political power. He "absolutely disapproves of those turbulent temperaments who never fail to plan some new reformation, although they are not called by fortune nor by birth to the management of public affairs."<sup>18</sup> This unusual constriction of the bases of legitimacy to fortune and birth is still more surprising if one considers fortune as a claim to legitimacy: if fortune legitimates, then every attempt to seize power has the prospect of legitimacy, since an individual cannot know he has been "called by fortune to the management of public affairs" prior to success. Since chance or fortune set Descartes himself on the right path to the discovery of the true "foundations," his project is blessed with legitimacy from its inception. To show the legitimacy of supreme mastery Descartes must show the possibility of the total mastery of fortune. But "one must entirely reject the vulgar opinion that there is outside of us a Fortune that makes things happen or not happen." As with Machiavelli, whose stamp on Descartes' treatment of the goddess Fortuna is unmistakeable, it is nature that must be mastered. Still the immediate issue is but the difficulty of public reformation by a private man: it will be solved for Descartes

by the attractive power for all men of the "fruits" of his philosophy and the strategy used to advertise them.

Once the general principles of physics are known, the "project" of Descartes becomes a "practical philosophy" "very useful for life" that can supplant the "speculative philosophy taught in the schools." By the "mastery and possession of nature" man can invent "an infinity of artifices that would enable us to enjoy, without any pain, the fruits of the earth, and all the comforts that are to be found there."<sup>19</sup> The fruits of the tree of knowledge will undo the consequences of the Fall in the garden, or, more precisely, will effectively deny its truth. The *Discourse* culminates then in a promise of a heaven on earth, or it imitates Bacon's writing on method, the *New Organon*, whose subtitle refers to "the kingdom of man." The science that leads to human happiness is not the traditional study of the excellence of the soul, moral and political science, and still less the "theology" that "shows the way to gain heaven," but medicine, the science of the body. "Health is without doubt the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life." Medicine is also the means to the prolongation of life, but above all it is the science that produces "wisdom," the ultimate fruit: "the mind depends so much on the temperament and on the disposition of the organs of the body that if it is possible to find some means which generally renders men wiser and more skillful than they have been hitherto, I believe that it is in medicine that one must search."<sup>20</sup>

To govern the relations between society and the philosophy that promises such fruits, Descartes asserts that there is a "law that obliges us to procure so far as it is in us, the general good of all men."<sup>21</sup> This law, the only categorical obligation ever asserted by Descartes, is stated but once in his writings, and no argument is ever offered for it. He declares that the law obliged him to publish his philosophy lest he "sin," but he never claimed to derive the law from "revealed truths." To account for this amazing mixture of bold assertion and resounding silence, we observe first that Descartes invoked the law only when he had discovered "general notions regarding physics": he did not regard his metaphysics, which contained what he claimed were the first demonstrative proofs of the existence of God and of his perfections, as of sufficient benevolence to the public to require publication. Indeed, immediately after expounding his metaphysics in the *Discourse* (Part IV), he turns to his physics in which he "discovered many truths more useful and more important than all [he] had learned before, or even hoped to learn."<sup>22</sup> In the context of the discussion of publication in the *Discourse* (Part VI), Descartes tacitly reformulates the law as a hypothetical obligation only, which binds those who desire the end or the fruits of the new



philosophy to seek the means to that end. The means are the required experiments, or the exchange of experiments between qualified people, or the political conditions that will sanction and promote such an exchange. The hypothetical character of the obligation appears in Descartes' "promise" that he would "show so clearly the utility that the public could receive" from his philosophy that he "would oblige all those who desire in general the good of men, that is to say, all those who are in fact virtuous and not merely seem so, not only to communicate to me [the experiments] they have already made, but also to aid me in the search for those that remain to be made."<sup>23</sup>

The "good of men"—the term lacks the sense of community of "the common good"—now comprises chiefly what all men have always sought as individuals or through society, namely, the satisfaction of needs, comfort, health, and long life, and this drastically lowered view of the common good is the standard of virtue. Thus Descartes, in common with the founders of modern political philosophy, reversed the relation of virtue and the common good as understood by the classics, revising both in the process. The "law" of benevolence is doubly hypothetical in that it obliges one to seek the means only if one accepts the desirability of the end of utility, but also only if the true means, the true physics or the science of "fruits," is available. It has its locus therefore not primarily in the relations of citizens to each other or with the sovereign, but in the mutual relations of philosophy or science and society. For this reason, but even more for the additional one that philosophy or science must be the principal donor and society the beneficiary of utility, Descartes did not offer any teaching on justice or natural right. "Generosity," the highest virtue of philosophers or scientists, excludes or replaces justice because it is based on a view of the soul different from that of either the ancient or modern teachers of natural right.

Descartes' first beginning in a new method is completed by a mathematical physics that forced him to confront the status of the soul and its knowledge in the metaphysical argument most fully presented in the *Meditations* (1641). He resolves to doubt absolutely, or rather to reject absolutely, every opinion or source of opinion in the slightest degree dubious, in order to establish "foundations" for the edifice of science. In the sequel, this resounding demand for "universal doubt" is carefully restricted; in *Principles* I, No. 10, its universality is denied; Leibniz remarked that the demand to "doubt all things" is perhaps meant "to stimulate the sluggish reader through novelty." Doubt is a procedure devised to suspend our natural trust in the senses and the images that derive therefrom—part of what Descartes calls "the teaching of nature" and came to be called "the natural attitude." To test

the dubitability of what does not depend on trust in images—especially mathematics which does not belong to opinion—Descartes invokes a God “who can do everything” and therefore can make false the most self-evident reasonings, that is, that the sum of two plus three is five. Since God, on this view of omnipotence, can suspend the principle of contradiction, all human reasoning would be at an end, unless the perfection of God necessarily excludes such deception. Since knowledge of God is as yet unavailable, or because God is but “an old opinion” and no solid reason for doubting, God is replaced by an “Evil Genius” who is not omnipotent and does not jeopardize mathematics nor that reasoning that is independent of trust in images.

The thought underlying the poetic fiction of the Evil Genius is prepared by the introduction of the “atheist” view that man and his thinking are the result of blind fate or chance or a continuous series of antecedent causes. The atheist view is often regarded as a more radical reason for doubting than the omnipotent and possibly evil God, because Descartes contends that the less powerful is man’s “author” the greater is the likelihood of human deception. Yet this assertion concerns difference of power alone, and hence not a comparison with a possibly evil God. Since it is as repugnant to a perfect God that he sometimes may allow us to be deceived as that he always do so—and it cannot be doubted that he sometimes allows us to be deceived—the divine jeopardy to human knowing remains an acute difficulty throughout the *Meditations*. In the context of doubt, the atheist supposition serves to question the harmony of the knower and the known, which appears to imply that the whole is ruled by intelligence. But Cartesian doubt takes a step beyond the premodern rejections of a ruling intelligence by abandoning as well the trust in the harmony of the images of sense and their objects. The images may be wholly deceptive; “life is a dream” may describe the natural situation; nature, indifferent to our desire or need to know, is personified by “the Evil Genius.”

More closely regarded, the natural trust in the similarity of image to thing had been rejected by the mathematical (or “nonempirical”) character of the scientific concepts of extension, figure, magnitude, et cetera. Yet to assert the dissimilarity of image to thing would seem to imply the existence of things “outside the mind” with which they are compared, and knowledge of this existence would seem to depend on the image. Does not the rejection of “the similarity thesis” of “the teaching of nature” require trust in nature as regards “the existence thesis”—as Descartes sometimes suggests? Nevertheless, in the *Medita-*

tions he customarily treats them as of equal dubitability. Accordingly the existence thesis, or "the great inclination to believe" that bodies exist, must ultimately require the goodness of God as a guarantee of its acceptability. If we object that the same guarantee would seem to be available to guarantee our strong inclination to believe that things resemble our images, we nonetheless must recognize that this would contravene the demands of Cartesian science. The Evil Genius renders dubious the existence of "all external things" or the bodily, including the body of the doubter, and *a fortiori* by implication the similarity thesis. Only these two theses are doubted within the range of "universal doubt." It is logically possible to doubt the existence of the bodily, or of "matters of fact" in Hume's phrase, or of the teaching of nature, while asserting the existence of the doubter; it is even necessary to assert that existence. Hence "this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it or that I conceive it in my mind." Since the knowledge that "I am" does not depend for its truth on the knowledge of body, or on any knowledge of nature or being, it has an "epistemological" priority to any subsequent assertion of a "metaphysical" kind.

This principle is the "Archimedean point" that establishes the existence of the knowing ego within the whole, whose enmity is overcome by the mathematical physics of the mastery of nature. Only following the determination of the principle does Descartes ask what mind or thinking is: the "cogito" is therefore prior to, and independent of, any determination of the materiality or immateriality of the human mind. Descartes compromised the absolute autonomy of the thinking ego, according to most contemporary scholars, by proceeding to prove the existence of an omnipotent God who is possessed of an infinity of infinite perfections: God is therefore the first principle or cause of all things, and so of man and man's knowledge. Descartes made the difficulty of interpreting his metaphysics almost insuperable by also asserting that the finite human mind cannot know anything infinite, and by concluding therefore that "God is incomprehensible."<sup>24</sup> Resolution of these difficulties will vary as one agrees with most contemporary scholars that Descartes published his essential thought with complete candor, or with earlier men such as Leibniz who said, "Descartes took care not to speak so plainly [as Hobbes], but he could not help revealing his opinions in passing, with such address that he would not be understood save by those who examine profoundly these kinds of subjects."<sup>25</sup> However this may be, Descartes never claimed to derive from the knowledge of God any knowledge of man's duties or rights; whereas from

"the infinite perfections of God" he did claim to derive "the laws of nature."

Descartes' metaphysical argument furnished him with one source of the understanding of the soul that underlies his theory of "generosity." The second source of his view of the soul is physics, or the "medicine" that treats "the machine of our body," most fully presented in his final publication, the *Passions of the Soul* (1649). According to his metaphysical argument, the free will is a function of mind or soul, an immaterial substance, separate from corporeal substance, yet able to act on corporeal substance, specifically on the human body, in a manner that Descartes admittedly did not adequately explain. This metaphysical view is reflected in the first part of the definition of generosity, which is the "knowledge" that "nothing truly pertains to [man] but this free disposition of his volitions, nor any reason why he should be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly." However, according to the physical argument, the heat of the heart "is the corporeal principle of all the movements" of "the machine of our body," while "the first cause" of the error of "the ancients" is the belief that "the soul gives movement to the body." Hence the metaphysical argument would repeat the ancient error. On the physical argument, thinking or consciousness is awareness of the motions of the (wholly corporeal) animal spirits, which awareness Descartes did not adequately explain; and the will is not free but acted on by the passions: "the principal effect of all the passions in men is that they incite and dispose their soul to will the things to which they prepare the body." This second or physical view is reflected in the second part of the definition of generosity, "that [man] is sensible in himself of a firm and constant resolution . . . never to fail of his own will to undertake and execute all the things that he judges to be the best, which is to follow perfectly after virtue." "Resolution" Descartes understands as a species of courage which is a "certain heat or agitation" of the animal spirits that "disposes the soul powerfully to bear itself to the execution of the things that it seeks to do." This physiological view of the soul best explains why Descartes can say he speaks in the *Passions of the Soul*, whose first part treats "the whole nature of man," "as a physicist."<sup>26</sup> (The seventeenth-century English philosopher Henry More openly avowed the physiological interpretation of the Cartesian soul, which doctrine he called "Nullibism."<sup>27</sup>)

However we view these alternatives, we may say that "generosity" is awareness of one's identity in the quality of one's will or resolution. The freedom of the will "in a certain measure renders us like God in making us masters of ourselves, provided that we do not through

cowardice lose the rights which He gives us.”<sup>28</sup> Since cowardice deprives man of rights, they belong to the brave or resolute, hence peculiarly to the “generous.” Yet “cowardice has some use when it exempts us from taking the pains that we might be incited to take by probable reasons, if other more certain reasons, which have caused them to be judged useless, had not excited this passion.”<sup>29</sup> Hence very certain reasons may perhaps deprive the generous of their God-given rights. However this may be, no argument nor any scriptural basis is ever offered by Descartes for the existence of these rights, nor does he ever mention them again.

The political meaning of generosity emerges by contrast with Aristotle’s virtue of “magnanimity,” of which generosity is a revised version, according to Descartes. Magnanimity is a cultivated habit or disposition of the soul, whereas Descartes chooses the new name “generosity” precisely because it is not cultivated but an ingenerate, or congenital, temperament at least partly physiological. Generous minds, or “strong and noble minds,” have their strength from birth, or by nature, hence are “masters” by nature, a natural nobility or aristocracy. Whereas magnanimity was for Aristotle a comprehensive moral virtue and therefore distinct from and lower than theoretical virtue, generosity is Descartes’ highest virtue simply: since its supreme object is “mastery of nature” through mathematical physics, the very distinction between theory and practice becomes doubtful. Magnanimity comprehends and presupposes the other virtues, hence in particular the virtue of justice, and is therefore “a kind of ornament of the [other] virtues.”<sup>30</sup> Generosity, on the other hand, does not presuppose the other virtues, and Descartes does not mention justice as a virtue or passion; generosity is rather “the key to all the virtues.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Descartes does not offer any kind of natural-right teaching. As contrasted with the ancients, the absence of any natural order of the soul precluded a natural-right teaching of the traditional type. He shared with Hobbes, the chief founder of modern natural-right doctrine, the view that reason serves the passions. In the decisive context of the comparison of man and the brutes, reason is a “universal instrument”<sup>32</sup>: what distinguishes man from the brutes is a unique means, not a specifically different end. But as contrasted with Hobbes, he viewed political society from the perspective of the strong or generous minds whose sense of the strength of their resolution, their strongest passion, is unique to them. Hence he rejected the egalitarian perspective of Hobbes’s *On the Citizen* according to which the passion for self-preservation is the strongest passion of all men, and therefore the basis of natural rights.

Generosity is a political passion or virtue not merely because its

object is that mastery of nature which is productive of goods for all men. Knowledge of generosity is the primary part of that "wisdom," or perfect moral science, that teaches man to be master of and hence to enjoy the passions, by which man "tastes the highest sweetness in this life."<sup>33</sup> "Epicurus was not wrong, when considering in what beatitude consists . . . to say that it is pleasure in general." However, the "satisfaction and contentment" of the consciousness of one's own strength in the mastery of nature are not incompatible with the pleasure of glory accorded by others for the benevolent results of mastery: the highest philosophic and political rewards may coincide in the same soul. Descartes does not "profess to scorn glory as did the Cynics"<sup>34</sup> and the Epicurean tradition. The quest for glory may indeed disturb "contentment" or "repose" of mind, but glory as respect of "the people" or the vulgar for "the exterior of our actions" is also pursued for the sake of safety and hence "repose." The true glory is the recognition of other "strong and noble minds" for the benevolence of what is not visible externally, the perfect moral science or "wisdom." "It is a reason to esteem oneself to see that one is esteemed by others."<sup>35</sup> The primary self-esteem or generosity is accordingly enhanced by the esteem or glory that is granted for benevolence, and benevolence thus understood becomes the substitute for justice.

Descartes' "reformation" begins with the transformation of philosophy into the project of mastery of nature, of virtue into the science of the passions, and of perfect theoretical and practical virtue into the single virtuous passion of generosity. Since mastery of nature is a means to a practical end for all men, philosophy must bear a novel relation to society. The relation is a compound of a threat to the traditional foundations of society and a promise of benevolence by the fruits of mastery of nature. Yet this jeopardy is redeemed by the fact that the "universal doubt" that method demands is so far from doubting the view that the good is the useful that it is in fact based on this view, and the useful is needed by all societies always. Therefore, Descartes' project can be welcomed by all societies except those based on traditional virtue or piety, or it is relatively neutral to the differences among types of regimes. The support of the project of science by the most liberal as well as the most tyrannical regimes in modern times offers some evidence for this neutrality. For this reason primarily Descartes never articulated a view of the best regime. The convergence of the goals of philosophy and society is not destroyed by the fact that the useful sought by the generous minds is not identical with the useful sought by society. For the final wisdom of the passions, and the prize of glory, sought by

the generous, demands the same means, *i.e.*, the advancement of science, that is required to achieve the useful fruits sought by society. The fundamental premise of the harmony of philosophy and society is that all men are ruled by the passions.

The common means, the advancement of science, cannot be achieved without a certain transformation, or new "legislation," of social institutions. Science will advance only if the free exchange of "experiments" or free communication is sanctioned within the borders of society, but also between societies; it will achieve its promise only if society also promotes science by the endowment of scientists with safety, income and deference. This free exchange cannot be limited to exchange of knowledge: societies, or more precisely, the political authorities, are not competent judges of knowledge. Hence society must not only sanction the competent or the scientists as judges but must sanction all communication of doctrines. Society therefore necessarily surrenders control of its opinions, *i.e.*, its "foundations," since the ruling opinions of society are necessarily affected by the free communication of doctrines. Moreover, society will be profoundly affected by "the infinity of artifices" or technology of science. Society cannot have knowledge of science but only belief in the benevolence of science. But since society had originally no acquaintance with the benevolence of science, nor its social requirements, it was necessary for Descartes, following Bacon, to "enlighten" society regarding both.

"Enlightenment" may be said to have three meanings. It is an unprecedented type of political action undertaken by the founders of modern philosophy and continued by most of their followers that forges the bond between philosophy or science and society in the common enterprise of "the mastery of nature." It may also be said to be the rhetoric employed in forging the bond, and the relationship established by it. Since the optimum condition of the progress of science demands the cooperation of the scientists of various countries, and hence freedom of communication among them, and requires as well the spread of knowledge of the conditions of the advancement of science, Enlightenment implies "open societies" linked with each other in the common enterprise of "the mastery of nature." It is necessarily antithetical to any societies, or elements in a society, that seek the autonomous cultivation and preservation of their own morality and way of life. Thus Enlightenment is by intention a universal politics, potentially of global magnitude, and the first of philosophic origin.

Because it is a compound of a promise and a threat, the Enlightenment rhetoric is divisive of society, both at the time of its inception and

after its victory. Descartes indicates its promise to three kinds of men. In the *Discourse* especially he appeals to the men of "good sense" or "the public," a broad middle range of mankind that thinks itself adequately provided with "good sense," which Descartes provisionally and deceptively equates with reason. The truth underlying this flattery is that the men of good sense reason well on "matters that especially concern [them]" and regarding which errors of judgment "punish them soon afterwards":<sup>36</sup> their rationality is rooted in their self-interest or self-preservation in the here and now, and not what will punish them in another life. Descartes' rhetoric advertises to them that they are the beneficiaries of the project that produces "the fruits of the earth without pain," and of the social conditions of the progress of the project. They are the natural allies of the second group, the generous minds, or the scientists who build on his foundations and the *philosophes* who propagate his reformation. One may distinguish as a third group the political rulers proper who necessarily welcome Descartes' advocacy of knowledge useful for society, as well as his opposition to the political ambitions of "reformers" who believe God has given them "sufficient grace and zeal to be prophets."<sup>37</sup>

He invites these groups to join in common opposition against those opponents who draw their beliefs from "the ancient books, their histories and their fables." Together with "reformers" and "prophets" he places those who, believing themselves "devout" and "great friends of God," though in fact "only bigots and superstitious," have "committed the greatest crimes that can be committed by men, as betraying cities, killing princes, and exterminating entire peoples, only because they did not follow their opinions." The popular support of these zealous leaders comes from "the weak minds," a term used repeatedly by Descartes to designate those who are prone to "superstition," and whose "consciences" are agitated by "repentances and remorse,"<sup>38</sup> the human type most opposed to "the strong and noble minds." But these latter have a remedy available, the science of the passions: "even the weakest minds could acquire a most absolute empire over all their passions if one employed enough industry to train them, and to conduct them."<sup>39</sup> Behind the zealous stands the authority of "the school," or scholasticism: "the monks have supplied the opportunity for all sects and heresies through their theology, that is to say, their scholasticism, which before all must be exterminated."<sup>40</sup> Because of this alliance of friend against foe, d'Alembert could "regard [Descartes] as a chief of conspirators who first had the courage to raise himself up against a despotic and arbitrary power."



Yet Descartes' Enlightenment rhetoric must vanquish more fundamental enemies to ensure the lasting success of his project. Not only his "preceptors" or the books of Latin Christendom "corrupt the natural reason," but so also do the "Greek and Latin books."<sup>41</sup> He made plain that his only rivals on the plane of his endeavor, or those alone "whose writings we possess" who sought out "the first causes and the true principles," were "Plato and Aristotle." Hence those whose "prejudices" most oppose his project are those who have "most studied the ancient philosophy." His rhetoric has then the function of opposing the whole tradition of humanistic learning, which required him to oppose tradition simply. Since the view that the good is the old or the traditional can never be fully eradicated, Enlightenment rhetoric has a permanently divisive social function. Descartes succeeded in turning the questioning of the identity of the good and the old by classic philosophy against the classics by identifying them as the old or the tradition. The classic tradition appeared to him, as it had to Stevin and Grotius, as a corruption of the wisdom of the golden youth of the world in some pre-Socratic *siècle sage*.<sup>42</sup> Since Descartes knew that some less than philosophically precise belief regarding the whole is required as a foundation for society, he sought to supply a substitute for tradition that would foster the project of science. By a scientific "fable of the world," or by what purported to be a scientific account of the genesis of the heavens and the earth, of the visible universe and all its phenomena, he established the belief that science is master of the whole; and by the promise of the progress of science toward infinite benefits he and Bacon established the "idea of progress," or the belief that the good is the future whose benevolence owes nothing to tradition, to nature, or to God.

It was not Descartes but Bacon who first proposed a "project" that promised maximum benevolence to society by a universal method, and hence inaugurated the politics of Enlightenment. Descartes following Bacon may be said to have accepted but revised Machiavelli's earlier fusion of the highest glory or mastery with the highest benevolence through a political teaching devoted to the mastery of chance or nature in human affairs. It was initially Machiavelli's "realism" that taught that reason does not by nature seek the pure truth but serves the passions, or that "the natural force of man's judgment" does not suffice, as Bacon put it, and hence reason must be "equipped" with the artifact of method, or that reason must be "conducted" by the "work" or art of method, as Descartes said. Precisely Machiavelli's incipient critique of the impurities of natural reason demanded that nature be remedied, or rather mastered, by art, or by the construction of a method. Whereas Machiavelli thought

that the understanding of man must descend to include that of the beast in order to ascend to the mastery of human nature, Bacon thought that a first mastery of the human understanding itself must be gained by descending to learn from the mechanical arts so that the ascent to the mastery of all nature "be done as if by machinery." Hence on the basis of Machiavelli's "realism," Bacon attempted to surpass Machiavelli, as is especially evident in the *New Organon* (Book I, section 129). For the "endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe" through a universal method is more benevolent than the teaching of political modes and orders. "The benefits of discoveries may extend to the whole race of man, civil benefits only to particular places; the latter last not beyond a few ages, the former through all time;" "civil reformatations" usually begin in violence, but discoveries confer benefits without causing sorrow to any.

This argument in its entirety is a germinal part of the project of Descartes. The genealogy of Descartes' project is especially visible in the amazingly similar statements of the doctrine concerning "reformation" of political bodies by a private individual in the *Prince* (chapter vi), the *New Organon* (Book I, section 129), and the *Discourse* (Part II). According to Descartes, Bacon did not see with sufficient clarity that the new method must be mathematical to be certain or "systematic," or that it required a new mathematics and a mathematical physics and a corresponding determination of the soul. By these momentous amendments,<sup>43</sup> but on the foundation laid by Machiavelli, Descartes became "the founder of modern philosophy."

## NOTES

1. J. d'Alembert, *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*, ed. L. Ducros (Paris, 1930), 104.

2. R. Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1910), V, 159. References are to this edition if the original text is not available in the Pléiade edition, *Oeuvres et Lettres*, ed. A. Bridoux (Paris, 1952).

3. A.-T. XI, 320; Pléiade 1245; A.-T. IV, 67.

4. Pléiade 566.

5. *Ibid.*, 127-128, 130.

6. *Ibid.*, 885.

7. *Ibid.*, 130.

8. *Ibid.*, 130.

9. *Ibid.*, 695.

10. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

11. *Ibid.*, 132.

12. *Ibid.*, 133-134.

13. *Ibid.*, 768-769.

14. *Ibid.*, 134-135.

15. *Ibid.*, 141.

16. A.-T. V, 178.

17. Pléiade 568.

18. *Ibid.*, 135.

19. *Ibid.*, 168.

20. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

21. *Ibid.*, 168.

22. *Ibid.*, 154.

23. *Ibid.*, 171.
24. *Ibid.*, 295, 579-580; A.-T. VII, 9.
25. G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophischer Briefwechsel*, I, 506.
26. Pléiade 768-769, 696-697, 698, 715; A.-T. XI, 326.
27. *Philosophical Writings of Henry More*, ed. F. I. MacKinnon (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1925), 183-96. Descartes, "the prince of the nullibists," "befooling" his readers with his "jocular subtilty," contended that "incorporeal spirits" exist, "but would be found to do it only by way of an oblique and close derision of their existence, saying indeed they exist, but then hiddenly and cunningly denying it, by affirming they are no where" or "null ibi."
28. Pléiade 768.
29. *Ibid.*, 779.
30. Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 1124a.
31. Pléiade 774.
32. *Ibid.*, 165.
33. *Ibid.*, 795.
34. *Ibid.*, 1199, 131, 792.
35. *Ibid.*, 791.
36. *Ibid.*, 131, 133.
37. *Ibid.*, 168.
38. *Ibid.*, 1244, 141-142.
39. *Ibid.*, 722.
40. A.-T. V, 176.
41. Pléiade 179, 562, 564, 879, 884.
42. *Ibid.*, 560, 562, 564; A.-T. 373-376.
43. For these steps, see especially J. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge & London, 1968), 197-211.

## READINGS

- A. Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method*. Trans. L. J. Lafleur. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1951.
- B. Descartes, René. *Meditations*. Trans. with introduction by L. J. Lafleur. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1951.